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To cite this article: Hendrika Jacoba Brouwer, Semra Griffiths, Alycia Jacob, Thomas Aaron Ricks, Paula Schulz, Sharni Lavell, Louisa Lam & Elisabeth Jacob (11 Apr 2024): What are the facilitators and barriers experienced by sessional academics during the process of onboarding: a scoping review, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, DOI: [10.1080/1360080X.2024.2340987](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2024.2340987)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2024.2340987>



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Published online: 11 Apr 2024.



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What are the facilitators and barriers experienced by sessional academics during the process of onboarding: a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Sessional academics undertake a large proportion of teaching and marking and are essential for current university structures and student success. Employment of sessional academics has primarily been driven by cost savings and flexibility in hiring practices for employers, in addition to managing academic staffing shortages. Despite the increase in sessional employment, little is known about the experience of sessional academics regarding support and processes for integrating them into university structures. This scoping review focused on identifying the facilitators and barriers experienced by sessional academics during the onboarding process. Two university departments that can contribute to improving the onboarding process are identified: human resources and the individual academic unit. Six subthemes were identified during the literature analysis to support onboarding: contractual, orientation, resources, communication, mentoring and belonging. These themes have been explored and discussed and key recommendations have been made for policymakers and managers, with further research proposed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 October 2023
Accepted 5 April 2024

KEYWORDS

Sessional academics;
adjunct; onboarding;
facilitators; barriers; higher
education policy

Introduction

Sessional academics are increasingly more recognised for their significant contribution to the quality of teaching and learning that positively enhances student experience and graduate outcomes (Hamilton et al., 2013). They are considered vital for course delivery, pedagogical relationships, and student satisfaction (Hattam & Weiler, 2021; Leathwood & Read, 2022). This review focuses on the onboarding process of casual or fixed-term teaching and marking-only employed academics paid an hourly rate, referred to as 'Sessional Academics'. Globally, obtaining precise data on sessional academics proves

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challenging due to the high turnover and inferior data collection of universities (May, 2014). For example, the Australian Government Department of Education (2023) reports a casual academic workforce of 15.7% employed in 2021. In response, Monash University President and Vice-Chancellor Professor Margaret Gardner (2014 – 2023) estimated that 31% of the academic workforce is sessional (2023). This significant discrepancy between expert opinions is evidence of the difficulties in ascertaining accurate data. Secondly, varying naming conventions and employment arrangements nationally and globally add to the challenge of comparing this precarious workforce (May, 2014). Cost savings have primarily driven the employment of sessional academics; however, flexible hiring practices for employers and academic staffing shortages have also contributed (Santra, 2021; C. E. Smith et al., 2022). Globally, the response to calls for improvement for sessional academics in higher education is seen as challenging institutional policy and practice (Crawford & Germov, 2015; Knight et al., 2007). With large numbers of sessional academics employed in universities, it is vital to understand the professional expectations of sessional academics to establish successful onboarding practices and meet their professional development needs to increase student satisfaction, organisational commitment and continuity in employment (K. Peters et al., 2011).

Background

Onboarding refers to the process through which new employees are integrated into an organisation. It is defined as ‘the process in which new employees gain the knowledge and skills they need to become effective members of an organisation’ (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.). It is a comprehensive process that starts with the employment contract and involves an initial orientation to the role, understanding university structure and reporting lines, introducing mentors, outlining available resources, and completing required training programmes, including induction into the culture, mission and values of the organisation, and usually occurs over a set period (The Society for Human Resource Management, 2023). Sessional academic onboarding practices are essential to encourage staff retention, reduce sick leave, improve teaching quality, and increase staff commitment and accountability (Joiner & Bakalis, 2006; K. Peters et al., 2011; Richardson et al., 2021). Poor onboarding and orientation practices affect staff motivation, resulting in turnover and poor quality of teaching outcomes (Knight et al., 2007; Sokolowich, 2018). Barriers to onboarding include the lack of or late orientation due to late hiring, insufficient mentoring, and a lack of commitment by the organisation to fund onboarding programmes and mandatory training (Jackson, 1996; McComb & Eather, 2023; Rodrigues, 2019). This paper aims to explore the barriers and facilitators that sessional academics experience during onboarding, provide recommendations for policymakers and managers to meet the onboarding needs of sessional academics that are low cost but have a high impact and propose areas for further related research to improve these processes for sessional academics.

Methods

A scoping review was selected for this study as a method used to undertake a preliminary assessment of the available research, report on evidence of practice, and inform future practice. This review type is broad in its research questions and objectives and, whilst

seeking a potentially large and diverse body of literature, is explicit and unbiased in its description of the scope of literature included to map that evidence (Munn et al., 2018; M. D. J. Peters et al., 2020, 2021). Sharing similarities with systematic reviews such as the need for comprehensive, systematic, and transparent conduct and reporting, a key difference is that systematic reviews address a clearly defined question and attempt to not only collate but sum up the best available empirical research – most often drawn from randomised controlled trials, to answer that question. Systematic reviews must furthermore assess and synthesise evidence for risk of bias, a recommended but optional step for scoping reviews. Narrative literature reviews offer an evaluation of available evidence; however, they lack a rigorous plan and strategy and are therefore subject to bias by authors wanting support for their views (Grant & Booth, 2009). This scoping review adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018).

Search strategy

The literature search and study selection process was conducted according to the PRISMA-ScR guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018). The search strategy was designed to align with the research question, focusing on the onboarding processes for non-permanent, paid university academics in the university sector internationally. Initial searches of the World Wide Web and Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) via EBSCOHost revealed that the literature illustrated a broad and varied interpretation and naming of these academics. Without a global definition for ‘sessional academics’, a wide range of terms were confirmed for inclusion in the search strategy. The final search strategy was conducted in ERIC (EBSCOHost), then translated to other health and multi-disciplinary databases: MEDLINE (EBSCOHost), the Cumulative Index for Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL) (EBSCOHost), and Web of Science. All databases were searched from inception through to March 2023. The detailed search strategy used in ERIC included keywords, synonyms, and controlled vocabulary, and can be viewed in Table 1. The database searches resulted in a total of 1409 citations, collated in Endnote

Table 1. ERIC (EBSCOHost) Search strategy.

Search no.	Query
S1	onboarding OR induction OR orientation OR ‘initial training’
S2	(DE ‘Staff Orientation’) OR (DE ‘Teacher Orientation’)
S3	S1 OR S2
S4	tertiary OR ‘higher education’ OR universit* OR college OR ‘post#secondary’ OR ‘polytechnic institut*’
S5	((DE ‘Postsecondary Education’) OR (DE ‘Higher Education’)) OR (DE ‘Universities’)) OR (DE ‘Colleges’)
S6	S4 OR S5
S7	(sessional OR casual OR ‘non-tenure track’ OR untenured OR ‘non-continuing’ OR contingent OR associate OR ‘non-permanent’ OR temporary OR adjunct OR visiting OR ‘off-tenure track’ OR ‘part time’) AND (faculty OR academic OR lecturer OR employ* OR teach* OR staff OR contract OR instructor OR professor)
S8	(DE ‘Nontenured Faculty’) OR (DE ‘Adjunct Faculty’) OR (DE ‘Part Time Faculty’) OR (DE ‘Temporary Employment’)
S9	S7 OR S8
S10	S3 AND S6 AND S9
S11	S3 AND S6 AND S9
	Limiters:
	Language: English

v20.5 (Analytics, 2023). These results were then imported into Covidence (Veritas Health Innovation, 2023) for the removal of duplicates and for screening.

Eligibility criteria and study selection

The population, concept and context framework (PCC) was used to construct this scoping review's objectives and eligibility criteria (Pollock et al., 2023). All international publications (peer-reviewed and otherwise) containing quantifiable data were considered relevant and therefore included if they discussed the experience of onboarding processes by sessional academics in universities. No date restrictions were applied to ensure a comprehensive collection of contemporary and historical discussions on the topic. Only English-language publications were considered in this review. As onboarding processes differ between community colleges and universities, publications focused on community colleges and non-tertiary level education, such as secondary high schools and teachers, were excluded. Literature reviews and other review articles, as well as grey literature sources such as commentaries, editorials and letters, were also excluded. In Covidence, the title and abstract of retrieved articles were each screened for inclusion anonymously by at least two of the six authors (HB, LL, SL, PS, EJ, TR). All authors were involved in the title abstract and full-text review to determine eligibility. Covidence automatically progresses publications to the next appropriate stage, when any two authors have voted to accept or reject it according to the above pre-designed criteria. A third author resolved conflicting votes between any two authors. For final eligibility, three authors (HB, LL, TR) assessed the remaining papers for inclusion according to the above-outlined criteria, including discussions of the onboarding process of sessional academics at a university. [Figure 1](#) outlines the PRISMA (Page et al., 2021) results and study selection process.

Results

A total of 11 articles were eligible for inclusion in this scoping review. Seven of these articles originated from the US (Anderson, 2007; Frias, 2010; Jackson, 1996; Negar et al., 2022; Rodrigues, 2019; Sandhoff, 2018; Sokolowich, 2018), two from Australia (Brown et al., 2013; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000), one from the UK (Knight et al., 2007), and one from Canada (Davidson & Rourke, 2012). The studies were qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods in nature and included surveys, interviews, and focus groups (see [Appendix 1](#)). Analysing the 11 articles, the facilitators and barriers raised that impact the onboarding process for sessional academics lay mainly with two organisational departments: human resources and the academic department.

The human resources department is mainly responsible for administrative hiring practices, in particular the provision of contracts, mandatory training, records management, and the management of organisational workplace issues related to sessional academics. The themes related to this area were contractual employment arrangements, orientation and resources.

The theme '*contractual employment arrangements*' refers to the conditions of employment experienced by sessional academics. Issues identified included last-minute hiring (Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Jackson, 1996; Rodrigues, 2019; Sandhoff, 2018), job

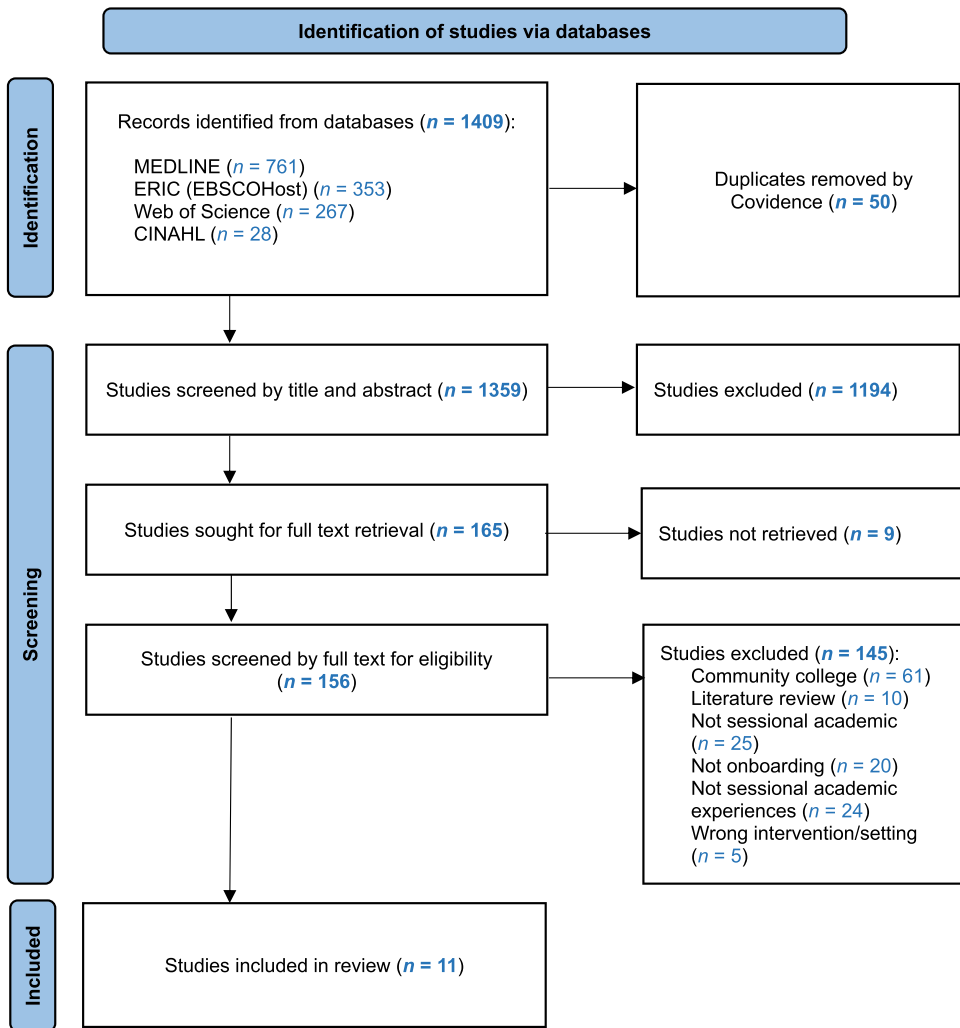


Figure 1. PRISMA study selection and results.

insecurity (Jackson, 1996), paid poorly (Jackson, 1996), lack of compensation for preparation and marking (Jackson, 1996), poor performance management Knight et al. (2007); Sandhoff (2018); E. Smith and Coombe (2000); Sokolowich (2018), and absence of, inadequate or late onboarding (Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Jackson, 1996; Negar et al., 2022; Rodrigues, 2019; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000; Sokolowich, 2018).

The second theme of human resources is *orientation*, which refers to the process of introducing sessional academics to organisational expectations. This includes challenges in understanding role expectations (Anderson, 2007; Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Rodrigues, 2019; Sokolowich, 2018), access to training modules (Knight et al., 2007; Negar et al., 2022; Sandhoff, 2018; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000; Sokolowich, 2018), attendance at workshops (Knight et al., 2007; Negar et al., 2022), access to policies and procedures (Anderson, 2007; Davidson & Rourke, 2012), understanding the curriculum (Anderson, 2007), understanding the mission, vision and values of the organisation

(Frias, 2010; Rodrigues, 2019) and receiving orientation (Anderson, 2007; Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Jackson, 1996; Sandhoff, 2018).

The third theme under human resources is access to *resources*. This refers to the ability of staff to access support to facilitate their teaching and inclusion in the teaching unit. Areas identified under this theme included staff requiring early access to teaching material (Brown et al., 2013; Jackson, 1996; Knight et al., 2007; Negar et al., 2022; Sandhoff, 2018), no training available and no access to learning systems (Davidson & Rourke, 2012; Knight et al., 2007; Negar et al., 2022), faculty handbook/lack of institutional resources or unaware of resources available (Anderson, 2007; Frias, 2010; Negar et al., 2022), IT/no access to internal information technology (Davidson & Rourke, 2012; Sandhoff, 2018) and below standard teaching spaces (Knight et al., 2007; Negar et al., 2022), access to mentors/support systems (Anderson, 2007; Brown et al., 2013; Jackson, 1996; Knight et al., 2007; Negar et al., 2022; Rodrigues, 2019; Sandhoff, 2018; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000; Sokolowich, 2018).

The individual academic unit was the second area of the university that impacted the onboarding experiences of sessional academics. The academic area is responsible for managing the educational programmes and teaching students. Themes identified in this area included communication, mentoring and belonging to the school. The first theme, *communication*, referred to the verbal, written and emailed communication between the sessional academic and staff in the academic department. This theme was discussed in four papers (Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Negar et al., 2022; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000) and is considered a facilitator to onboarding when sessional academics receive regular and effective communication and a barrier if there is a lack of or absence of communication from the school. The second theme, *mentoring*, referred to the availability of academics to support and mentor sessional academics. Issues identified included a lack of mentorship/support from colleagues (Anderson, 2007; Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Jackson, 1996; Knight et al., 2007; Sandhoff, 2018; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000; Sokolowich, 2018), lack of self-confidence (Knight et al., 2007), status (Jackson, 1996) and feeling isolated (Anderson, 2007; Brown et al., 2013; Knight et al., 2007). The third theme, *belonging*, referred to how well sessional academics felt part of the academic team. This included having a passion for teaching (Brown et al., 2013; Jackson, 1996; Sokolowich, 2018), strong motivation (Knight et al., 2007; Sokolowich, 2018), ongoing teaching within the same unit (Jackson, 1996; Knight et al., 2007) and sense of connectedness (Anderson, 2007; Negar et al., 2022; Rodrigues, 2019; Sandhoff, 2018; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000).

Discussion

Considering the significant presence of sessional academics in higher education that require onboarding, it is noteworthy that only 11 articles were analysed as appropriate for inclusion to answer the question, 'What are the facilitators and barriers experienced by sessional academics during the process of onboarding?'. This paper identified several facilitators and barriers that sessional academic staff experience during the onboarding process. The two main university departments influencing the onboarding process are the human resources department and the individual academic department. The practices of the first department, the human resources department, influence the onboarding

process for all sessional academics. The main influences were the contractual arrangement, orientation process and available resources. Human resources practices were seen to impact teaching preparation and employment continuity. Brown et al. (2013), Frias (2010) and Sandhoff (2018) identified that the successful onboarding of sessional academics increases performance, belonging and connectedness, overall wellbeing and organisational commitment.

Contract

Supplying contracts with sufficient time to increase job security and provide early access to the organisation's systems allows adequate preparation time for teaching classes, the ability to familiarise with the course material and to timely address students' queries, eliminating emotions of stress (Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Sandhoff, 2018). Receiving a contract early enough has been identified as a major facilitator to create a sense of belonging and preparedness as it allows access to internal systems to prepare for teaching (Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Jackson, 1996; Sandhoff, 2018). Historically, in the US and Australia, it appears to be common practice to hire staff the week or day before teaching begins, allowing little time for preparation (Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010; Sandhoff, 2018). Ryan et al. (2013) and Sandhoff (2018) acknowledge that the tight timeframe between hiring and teaching is a difficult obstacle to navigate as it is the nature of insecure employment, referred to as precarious employment and, more recently, a new term 'gig' is commonly used to describe this high level of insecure employment (LaMontagne et al., 2022). Although the benefits of this type of employment lay mainly with the employers, providing employers with a flexible workforce to manage fluctuations in student numbers and to buffer an already overstretched budget (Ryan et al., 2013), conditions must be favourable for sessional academics to improve job commitment, satisfaction and retention. The Red Report, an Australian-focused seminal study conducted by Percy et al. (2008), advocates stepping away from the current human resources model, which focuses on full-time academics and advises introducing a more suitable approach that benefits sessional academics, suggesting that the current model is outdated as policy and practice mainly focuses on full-time permanent centrally located teaching/research academics. Santra (2021) indicates that the effective management of sessional academics can be achieved by using value-based practices focused on commitment and characteristics of the nature of employment instead of the traditional models used.

Orientation

Orientation is the foundation stone for commencing a new position and building a relationship with the organisation. When done well, it functions as a positive anchor for sessional academics that drives engagement, loyalty, positive attitude and behaviour (C. E. Smith et al., 2022). Orientation facilitates a trained workforce and thereby enhances the quality of teaching and learning (Baik et al., 2018) and significantly adds value to the onboarding experience, instilling organisational commitment and improved performance (Knott, 2018). C. E. Smith et al. (2022) state that orientation works as an 'anchoring event', leading to a cost-neutral outcome as staff turnover is significantly

reduced. Lack of orientation or late orientation to the university impacts a sessional academic's ability to perform their teaching duties to the expected level. Consequently, this translates into the classroom and subsequently detrimentally affects the student's overall learning experience (Brown et al., 2013; Davidson & Rourke, 2012; Frias, 2010; Jackson, 1996; Ryan et al., 2013; Santra, 2021). Several papers report that sessional academics do not commonly receive orientation when employed (Brown et al., 2013; Jackson, 1996). Not receiving orientation particularly impacts novice sessional academics with less than three years of teaching experience (Brown et al., 2013). When managed well by a high-performing human resource department, orientation fosters job engagement, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Zhong et al., 2016).

Resources

The resources available to sessional academic staff, such as access to email accounts, learning systems, information technology, printers, guidelines on teaching and marking, available training, good facilities and being aware of available resources, influenced their ability to prepare for teaching. Davidson and Rourke (2012) suggest that access to resources, such as office areas, printers and online learning systems, is essential to the success of sessional academics. It supports productivity and efficiency and creates a sense of belonging and connectedness (Davidson & Rourke, 2012). Knight et al. (2007) reports that the lack of institutional resources hinders the quality of teaching and creates dissatisfaction among sessional academics with feelings of being treated as second-class citizens. Continuous access to resources improves teaching as staff can orientate themselves to teaching material, prepare class material and feel prepared for teaching (Sandhoff, 2018). New sessional academic staff must be provided with a network of resources to ensure they understand processes and policies and feel included and supported (Rodrigues, 2019).

The second area that influenced the onboarding experience was that of the individual academic unit. The main areas of influence were seen as communication, mentoring and belonging.

Communication

Communication is vital to enable sessional academics to perform well as it promotes inclusion, belonging and investment in the organisation. Brown et al. (2013) and Frias (2010) report that poor or absent communication significantly compromises sessional academics' understanding of processes, belonging and association with the university ultimately leading to high staff turnover. Survey respondents reported being isolated and unaware of who is who and which resources are available (Brown et al., 2013; Frias, 2010). Frias (2010) suggests a practical guide or a faculty handbook would significantly improve communication and provide institutional support.

Mentoring

Mentoring in the form of a buddy, assigned mentor or direct supervisor is recognised as a positive contribution to the onboarding process (Jackson, 1996; Knight et al.,

2007; Sokolowich, 2018). Providing guidance and mentorship can be informal or formal and promotes organisational socialisation and a sense of belonging and is part of professional transitional development in a new role (Frias, 2010). Negar et al. (2022) found that sessional academics felt empowered and connected through receiving positive mentorship. The feeling of being an outsider, low status and lack of confidence are closely associated with lack of guidance and mentorship (Anderson, 2007; Brown et al., 2013; Jackson, 1996; Knight et al., 2007; Sandhoff, 2018; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000; Sokolowich, 2018). Sokolowich (2018) found that mentoring was a significant facilitator of onboarding and retention. A lack of support from colleagues may inhibit the professional development of sessional academics and instil a negative culture of 'do-it-yourself apprenticeships' (Knight et al. (2007). Formal mentoring programmes require an investment of finances and time to produce the desired results of sessional academics feeling supported, thereby increasing teaching effectiveness (Dahlke et al., 2021). To implement mentoring programmes, individual academic departmental support is required to ensure that the sessional academic is paid for their time and hours are included in workload calculations for the mentor. Positively, this could be considered part of professional development for both mentor and mentee (Dahlke et al., 2021).

Belonging

Feeling connected to an organisation creates a sense of belonging and feeling part of the culture, promoting staff wellbeing (Rodrigues, 2019). Unfortunately, it is more common for sessional academics to feel disconnected, isolated, undervalued and an outsider treated as second-class citizens (Anderson, 2007; Brown et al., 2013; Knight et al., 2007; McComb et al., 2021). To create a sense of belonging, Brown et al. (2013) found that sessional academics empowered themselves through their passion and commitment to teaching. Personal motivation and the enjoyment of working with students create a strong sense of belonging, leading to job satisfaction (Jackson, 1996; Sokolowich, 2018). Sessional academics are mainly employed at the peripheries of academia, i.e., working directly with students, and they are well positioned to achieve a sense of belonging, enhancing students' overall learning experiences.

The above discussion highlighted multiple facilitators that can be implemented to improve onboarding practices and the overall wellbeing of the sessional academics and, in return, the intent to stay. Further, the enjoyment of working with students, passion for teaching, and hope to advance into a tenured position are strong intrinsic motivators to stay in academia (Brown et al., 2013; Jackson, 1996; Sokolowich, 2018).

Limitations

This study involved an extensive search and looked at the experiences of sessional academics globally. As with any global research, there may be a lack of nuanced in-depth analysis of staff in any specific jurisdiction. This is particularly the case for this study as significant differences exist in employment and labour hire practices between jurisdictions. A lack of standardised terminology for sessional academics impacted the search and may have resulted in some relevant papers being missed. Moving forward,

a standardised definition and understanding of the parameters of who are considered to be sessional academics would be beneficial.

Recommendations

Policymakers and relevant managers are encouraged to develop organisational workforce strategies and implement new policies and practices that meet the onboarding needs of sessional academics, thereby optimising organisational commitment, continuity in employment and ultimately student satisfaction. Even though previous recommendations have been suggested to improve the onboarding processes for sessional academics (Crawford & Germov, 2015), pushback at an organisational level has hindered this process as the universities are protecting their financial budget (Champlin & Knoedler, 2017; C. E. Smith et al., 2022). Optimistically, this review has identified multiple strategies that positively contribute to the employment satisfaction of sessional academics during the onboarding process. The scoping review matrix (see Appendix 1) comprehensively outlines all facilitators identified in the 11 articles included in this scoping review. The following recommendations are suggested as they may have a high cost benefit ratio and carry a high-value impact utilising evidence-based facilitators identified in this scoping review to improve the onboarding process for sessional academics.

At a human resource level, under the below themes, it is recommended that managers influence, develop and advocate for the following implementations:

Contracts

Clarify role and responsibilities by simply adding a job description in the employment contract to support the sessional academic in their role, thereby eliminating emotions of stress due to feeling unprepared and unsure of role expectations as discussed in Anderson (2007), Brown et al. (2013), Frias (2010), Rodrigues (2019) and Sokolowich (2018).

Secondly, it is recommended to supply a contract or agreement that allows continuous access to emails and learning systems in between teaching periods to provide uninterrupted email communications with students and sufficient time for class preparations. Ongoing access to the organisation systems improves the well-being of sessional academics and consequently the student learning experience (Negar et al., 2022; Sokolowich, 2018).

Orientation

Based on the findings of this review, it is recommended that orientation includes an overview of the university's mission, purpose and values, information on policies and procedures and a curriculum overview. Davidson and Rourke (2012) survey respondents highly rated the need for orientation to policies and procedures and curriculum to better understand how the policies are linked to the curriculum and relate to the varying student levels. This can be facilitated by developing an orientation handbook and online modules, as implemented successfully by the University of Wollongong as part of their workforce strategy to engage and support sessional academics (Crawford & Germov, 2015).

Resources

Access to the university's information technology, learning management systems, office areas and printers significantly increases productivity and job satisfaction among sessional academics (Davidson & Rourke, 2012). Access to resources is closely linked to the provision of employment contracts as this allows for access to the organisational facilities, buildings and internal websites. Therefore, if the recommendation of implementing a contract or agreement that allows for continuous access is adopted, then there is no cost involved to improve productivity and create a sense of belonging (Knight et al., 2007).

Under the themes below, it is recommended that managers and policymakers implement the following at the individual academic unit to increase the retention of sessional academic staff, job satisfaction, and, ultimately, the student learning experience.

Communication

Communication nurtures a sense of belonging with the organisation, the ability to perform a job efficiently, and improves the overall wellbeing of the sessional academic (Negar et al., 2022; E. Smith & Coombe, 2000). Anderson (2007) and Frias (2010) findings suggest that communication between the department and sessional academics can be improved by utilising a faculty handbook that outlines practical onboarding information, including a guide on communication processes and a quick guide summarising who is who and who to contact for what.

Additionally, the authors of this paper suggest disseminating an electronic newsletter that provides an overview of interesting topics relevant to sessional academics, such as information on available resources and a list of professional development opportunities. The newsletter can function as a vehicle that facilitates open communication, inclusion and engagement between the departmental levels and sessional academics. From the authors' experience, once the template has been created, it requires minimal time to compose and maintain.

Mentoring

As discussed, mentoring supports professional development and significantly increases job commitment and retention (Olaniyi, 2016). The authors recommend offering a structured support system with access to their line manager or a senior academic who can guide professional development and career advancement (Olaniyi, 2016). Additionally, it is advised to offer an informal buddy system, whereby the new staff member is paired with another staff member. This is proven to be highly successful as it provides personable support and guidance and is a mechanism to share experiences, resulting in increased job satisfaction through validation and appreciation and can be paid under professional development hours for both staff members (Knight et al., 2007; Sandhoff, 2018). The benefits of such an improved work culture and attrition will significantly outweigh the cost of high staff turnover (Fischer et al., 2020).

Belonging

The nature of precarious employment can lead to feelings of isolation within an organisation compared to staff in tenure positions (Dixon et al., 2015). Creating a sense of belonging is crucial to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment (Sandhoff, 2018). Belonging can be achieved by inviting sessional academics to relevant meetings to ensure they are part of the wider academic community Negar et al. (2022). Sessional academics should also be invited to social events to provide networking opportunities and building professional relationships Negar et al. (2022). While these recommendations may carry a cost, the long-term benefits of this investment are invaluable and outweigh any expenses. Further, acknowledging sessional academics for their excellence in teaching through teaching awards and having an open-door policy to ensure their voices are heard can strengthen a sense of belonging Negar et al. (2022).

Based on the findings of this study, the authors also recommend further research into two areas to improve the experience for sessional academics during onboarding. Firstly, a joint research project with the human resource department to understand the complexities of precarious employment in universities with a particular focus on contracts, orientation, and provision of resources to improve onboarding processes. Secondly, research at an academic department level to understand the current practice of managing sessional academics to identify areas of practice that can be improved to achieve job satisfaction and ultimately enhance student experience, the core business of the universities.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the critical role sessional academics hold in academia, it is evident that current practices need to be understood to improve onboarding processes and overall experience for this group. Historically, the onboarding process needs to be improved and meet expectations for sessional academics. From the 11 studies included, two university departments were identified as barriers and facilitators to onboarding sessional academics. The human resources department can assist sessional academics onboarding through good contractual and orientation processes and the provision of resources. The academic department can assist with strong communication, mentoring and processes that encourage belonging of sessional academics.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no financial/personal interest or belief could affect their objectivity.

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Appendix 1: Scoping review matrix

Author, Year & Country	Study Title	Aim of study	Study design	Barriers	Facilitators
Anderson (2007) United States	Mentoring New Adjunct Faculty to Teach Science Laboratories	To discuss mentoring and training strategies for adjunct faculty to support the development of an adjunct faculty handbook to improve efficiency, collegiality, and retention rate.	Mixed methods 95 surveyed 9–12 interviewed	Isolation Separation between teacher and campus	Orientation Understanding role expectations Policies and procedures Support system with other instructors Adjunct Faculty Handbook
Brown et al. (2013) Australia	A Message from The Chalk Face – What Casual Teaching Staff Tell Us They Want To Know, Access and Experience	To understand the information needs of casual teaching staff; obtain additional baseline data against which to evaluate the casual teaching staff project and implementation of the Casual Teaching Staff Policy; and make recommendations to improve the experiences of casual teaching staff in line with the benchmarking leadership and advancement of standards for sessional teaching (BLASST) Framework.	Mixed methods 199 surveyed Focus groups (n = 46)	Lack of mentorship No orientation and/or induction Poor communication No support system Last minute hiring Feelings of isolation Lack of respect Not being valued and being discriminated against	Understanding of role and responsibilities Passion and commitment to teaching
Davidson and Rourke (2012) Canada	Surveying the Orientation Learning Needs of Clinical Nursing Instructors	To identify the knowledge and skills that part-time clinical nursing instructors need to be successful.	Quantitative Study 44 surveyed	Difficulties with information technology No access to learning management systems (LMS) Lack of understanding of the curriculum, policies and procedures	Training in IT platforms Early access to LMS Understanding the curriculum
Negar et al. (2022) United States	Faculty Success Initiative: An Innovative Approach to Professional Faculty Onboarding and Development	To describe the design and operationalisation of the New York University Faculty Success Initiative (FSI), an onboarding and professional development program	Mixed methods 77 surveyed 10 interviewed	No onboarding program in place Lack of institutional resources access to IT Buddy and/or peer support LMS	Belonging and connection from the school Regular communication from Support – peer – mentor Workshops and networking events Access to educational resources – LMS

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Author, Year & Country	Study Title	Aim of study	Study design	Barriers	Facilitators
Frias (2010) United States	The Socialization of Part-Time Faculty at Comprehensive Public Colleges	To explore the first-person accounts of part-time faculty perceptions of socialisation as it relates to learning their role in comprehensive public colleges.	Qualitative Study 17 interviewed	Lack of faculty socialisation networks The absence of adequate communication from the school Orientation Late hiring	Effective communication Orientation sessions Understanding of the mission, purpose, and expectations of the organisation Handbook
Jackson (1996) United States	A survey of part-time faculty in baccalaureate schools of nursing and their learning needs	To assess the nursing and teaching educational backgrounds of part-time faculty in baccalaureate nursing programs and examine the learning needs of the respondents	Quantitative Study 239 surveyed	Lack of mentorship, orientation, and status Last-minute hiring No job security Paid poorly and not compensated for preparation and paper-grading time	Teaching in an area in which they had expertise (69.0%) Being hired with adequate time to be oriented (62.7%) Mentoring Enjoyment of working with students
Anderson (2007) UK	Enhancing Part-Time Teaching in Higher Education: A Challenge for Institutional Policy and Practice	To enhance the understanding of the processes of teachers' professional formation in higher education by developing a grounded view of how teaching practices develop in universities and by considering the implications for policy and practice that might be derived from that view.	Qualitative Study 32 interviewed	Lack of confidence, knowledge, time and direction Poor resources No access to IT and training Lack of support from colleagues	Buddying and mentoring Courses and workshops Information technology training Teaching the same subjects from the previous year Confidence and motivation Access to teaching resources
Rodrigues (2019) United States	Perceptions and Knowledge of a University Mission and Vision among Faculty Members: A Mixed-Methods Study on the Onboarding for Full-Time and Adjunct Faculty	To explore differences in perceptions of the onboarding process between adjunct and full time faculty and see if there was a difference in the attitudes and understanding regarding the mission and vision of the institution.	Mixed methods/ Focus groups 11 Interviews 29 Surveyed	No onboarding Late onboarding post-teaching Inconsistent onboarding processes	Mentoring Support and instruction from the school Onboarding program Understanding of role expectations Understanding of the mission

(Continued)



(Continued).

Author, Year & Country	Study Title	Aim of study	Study design	Barriers	Facilitators
Sandhoff (2018) United States	Novice Adjunct Online Faculty: Perceptions of Orientation and Faculty Development	To explore the lived experiences of novice adjunct online faculty in the first year of teaching online.	Qualitative Study 6 interviewed	Late hiring Not being informed of role expectations Lack of guidance on how to teach a course Short time to prepare for teaching	Support (mentors) Orientation to LMS systems Belonging
E. Smith and Coombe (2000) Australia	Distance Education at Arm's Length: Outsourcing of Distance Education Marking	This project focused on teaching and learning issues and was designed to explore differences between the marking approaches of permanent and sessional staff.	Qualitative Study 8 interviewed	Lack of understanding of the performance management process Insufficient marking time allocated Insufficient guidelines on marking Inadequate training No supervision	Connection with campus and industry
Sokolowich (2018) United States	Adjunct Clinical Nursing Faculty Online/Hybrid Orientation Experience: A Basic Qualitative Study	To describe the experiences of the adjunct clinical nursing faculty who have participated in a hybrid or online faculty orientation program in a Midwestern state.	Qualitative Study 6 interviewed	Lack of clear guidelines on role expectations Lack of training or mentoring	Passion for teaching Personal motivation Clear role definition Access to online training modules Mentorship